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TAGS: PGOV KIRF KISL JO

SUBJECT: A TWELVE YEAR OLD'S INDISCRETION LEADS TO MINOR VIOLENCE IN IRBID

Classified By: Classified by Charge d,Affaires Daniel Rubinstein for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) Limited violence, probably sectarian in nature, flared in Irbid on July 6 after some Muslims' religious sensibilities were apparently offended by a local boy. Coverage of the event, especially in the print press, has been spotty, and the Jordanian daily al-Ghad was careful to avoid mentioning any sectarian basis to the trouble in its page 11 report. A few conflicting reports and rumors have emerged. No deaths or serious injuries have been alleged.

¶2. (U) Jordanian daily Al-Ghad covered the story on July 9 without mentioning the religious identity of any parties involved. Al-Ghad reported that eye witnesses claimed the trouble started after locals were enraged by a cell phone video of a 12-year-old boy insulting "religion" that was distributed cell phone to cell phone via "bluetooth." The paper reported that fighting broke out and twelve stores were attacked. Security forces were deployed along Irbid's Cinema St. as a "precautionary" measure. The Governor of Irbid announced that police were in full control of the situation, and that the perpetrators had been detained pending an investigation. A spokesman for the Public Security Directorate claimed that the outbreak was within the context of more general disputes between the families involved. Note: Al-Ghad was careful not to state which religion was insulted, or how. End note.

¶3. (SBU) Embassy contacts elaborated on al-Ghad's report. According to information from members of Irbid's Christian community, a 12-year old boy from the Haddad family (a prominent Christian tribe) sold his cell phone, which reportedly contained pictures and videos of the boy mocking Muslims at prayer. Infuriated, the Muslim storeowner who had bought the phone spread the pictures and videos, and some Muslims angered by the pictures proceeded to attack "5 or 6" Haddad-owned shops. Riot police arrived and asked all Christian shopkeepers in the area to close for the day for their safety. According to these word-of-mouth reports, several members of the Haddad family have been taken into protective custody, and the police are trying to mediate between the Haddad family and the attackers.

¶4. (U) Other reports abound, particularly on internet news sites which have covered the incident in greater detail than the print press. Qatar-based newspaper Doha al-Sharq carried a report on July 7 claiming that a spate of attacks on Christian-owned shops followed an alleged insult against the Prophet Muhammad. Per this story (note: for which there is no confirmation whatsoever; end note), a Christian shop owner, angry that street peddlers were undercutting his prices, hurled an anti-Islam insult at them, resulting in extremists attacking Christian-owned shops. Jordanian internet news site as-Saraya claims only that a 12-year old boy sparked a brawl by insulting the Prophet Muhammad. Police intervention followed. The site did not note the boy's religion, but reader comments stated that he was Christian. Note: The reader comments contain the predictable vitriol and emotion that goes hand-in-hand with the

internet's anonymity. End note. Finally, as evidence of the rumor mill's powers of distortion, some circles in Irbid are alleging that the trouble started after a man from the Haddad tribe was found propagating the infamous Danish cartoons about the Prophet Muhammad.

¶ 15. (C) In Jordan, press discussion of communal identity, especially religious communal identity, is largely taboo. The logic is that reporting the issues would be pouring accelerant on a match. However, such lack of clarity in reporting enables the spread of rumors and half truths that, ultimately, are probably more harmful. What seems certain is that this flare-up was sparked by an insult to Islam, underlining the raw emotion that a religious slight can elicit on the Jordanian street.

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